

## Expository Writing 20: The Politics of Nostalgia

Abbreviated Syllabus  
Harvard College Writing Program, Fall 2021

### Note for prospective students:

This document is not a complete syllabus, but an abbreviated version, designed to give you a better sense of the course's materials and methods. The final syllabus will likely differ from this one in small ways.

### Course Overview:

What is nostalgia? The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers us a succinct definition: “Sentimental longing for or regretful memory of a period of the past, esp. one in an individual’s own lifetime; (also) sentimental imagining or evocation of a period of the past.”

But on closer inspection, nostalgia goes far beyond the simply sentimental. In the words of influential scholar (and late Harvard professor) [Dr. Svetlana Boym](#), nostalgia can be a “poetic creation, an individual mechanism of survival, a counter-cultural practice, a poison, or a cure.”

In this seminar, we will consider the “politics” of nostalgia in both the specific and more general senses of that word. While we will explore how nostalgic rhetoric can be used by politicians to sway voters, more broadly, we will investigate what’s at stake in longing for a vanished past. It’s an exploration that will take us from immigrant memoirs that commemorate lost homelands to movies and television series that critique the mythic Golden Age of 1950s America. Throughout, we’ll try to understand not only the nature of nostalgia, but its artistic, cultural, and political effects on American society.

### Unit Overview

Unit 1	Unit 2	Unit 3
In the first unit of the course, we will examine a range of deeply nostalgic texts, including excerpts from two memoirs—Eva Hoffman’s <i>Lost in Translation</i> and Audre Lorde’s <i>Zami: A New Spelling of My Name</i> —and a political speech ( <a href="#">Ronald Reagan’s 1980 Address</a> )	Our primary sources for this unit will include episodes of the award-winning series <a href="#">Mad Men</a> , which follows the life of Manhattan ad executive Don Draper at the dawn of the 1960s, and <a href="#">the Oscar-nominated film Carol</a> , a love story between two women set during the 1950s.	In our final unit, you will embark on independent research projects related to the theme of nostalgia. Students in previous versions of this class have written about a wide range of topics, including evocations of the Roman Empire in Italian Fascist architecture; “speedrunning” video games as an anti-nostalgic practice; the

<p><a href="#">Accepting the Republican Nomination for President</a>).</p> <p>As we investigate these works, students will practice one of the core skills of academic writing: making arguable claims based on close analysis of primary source evidence.</p>	<p>We will examine these fictional portrayals of midcentury America through the lenses provided by two major theorists of nostalgia: Dr. Svetlana Boym (quoted above), and Dr. Marc Le Sueur. In so doing, you will learn how to use a particular case study to test a scholarly theory.</p>	<p>poetry of Seamus Heaney; British heritage films as a genre; Dua Lipa’s 2020 album <i>Future Nostalgia</i>; and “cottagecore” as a digital, twenty-first century version of pastoral.</p>
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## Major Assignments

### Unit 1 Essay: Close Analysis of a Single Text

For their first essay, you have the option of writing about either a political speech (Reagan), or an excerpt from an immigrant memoir (Hoffman or Lorde). Each of these three texts represents different pasts in highly positive ways: Reagan’s speech looks back admiringly on different moments in American history; Hoffman’s memoir reveals her longing for her native Poland; and Lorde’s memoir stresses her childhood nostalgia for her parents’ homeland, a place she’d never seen before.

Regardless of the work you choose, your assignment is to *close read* your chosen text, making an argument about the relationship between the form of your piece (how it is written) and its content (what it is about). You will want your close reading to focus on how and why your chosen text uses nostalgic language and/or imagery. What seems to be the intended effect of such language and/or imagery on the reader? How do instances or patterns of this language/imagery relate to the work as a whole?

**Note:** The ideas you offer should be your own, informed by your close analysis and by ideas and questions we develop during discussion. No outside sources are required, nor should you consult any.

**Length:** Your final essay should be about 5-6 pages long (at least 1250 words). You should include a Works Cited section that cites your primary source, and a Cover Letter. (Neither counts toward the paper’s overall word count.)

### Unit 2 Essay: Analysis Using a Theoretical Lens

The 1950s and early 1960s are seen by many as a golden era of American life. This period—often simply referred to as the “midcentury”—has been the focus of many recent films and television series that seek to comment on the era and the nostalgia it so often provokes. In Unit 2, you will interpret one of these primary sources through the lens of a leading nostalgia theorist. In the process, you will build on the analytical skills developed in the previous unit.

The kind of essay you'll be writing is sometimes called a "lens essay." Often assigned at Harvard, this type of paper asks the writer to use a primary source as a case study to test the more general theories advanced by another scholar. The goal of such a paper is twofold. On one hand, the writer should demonstrate how the theoretical lens provides us with tools to uncover the deeper meanings or implications of the case study (in this case, *Carol* or *Mad Men*). At the same time, however, the writer should use the case study to assess the theoretical lens itself. (To achieve this second layer of analysis, you might consider the following questions: When applied to your case study, what are the blind spots of the theory? Where does the theory seem to excel at showing us what we might otherwise miss? What amendments to the theory might make it better suited to analyzing a primary source such as the one in front of you?)

For this essay, you need to develop an **Analytical Question** about your chosen primary source that can be addressed using the theoretical lens of your choosing. Your essay may also draw on the provided contextual material.

**Length:** Your final essay should be about 6-8 pages long (at least 1500 words). You should include a Works Cited section, and a Cover Letter. (As with Essay 1, neither counts toward the paper's overall word count.)

**Primary Source Bank (please choose only one):**

*Mad Men*, Season 1, episodes 1 and 2  
*Carol* (directed by Todd Haynes)

**Theoretical Lenses (please choose only one):**

Svetlana Boym's "Nostalgia and Its Discontents"  
 Marc Le Sueur's "Anatomy of Nostalgia Films: Heritage and Methods."

**Contextual Material (optional):**

Excerpts from Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*  
 Data from the 2016 PRRI American Values Survey

**Unit 3: Making a Researched Argument Using Multiple Sources**

In Unit 1, you learned how to closely analyze a written primary source. In Unit 2, you learned how to use another scholar's argument as a lens to interpret a film. In Unit 3, you will build on these skills as you write a paper that draws on multiple sources to make a researched argument.

For this assignment, you will write about a primary source of your own choosing (subject to my approval) that relates to or involves nostalgia in some way. It may be a movie or an episode of a television series; it may be a novel, a memoir, a political manifesto, or other written source; it may be a historical event; it may even be a less-conventional source, such as a music video or an Instagram

account. The goal here is for you to follow your own interests while keeping our course's theme in mind.

As you consider possible paper topics, remember that deciding on an appropriate primary source will likely involve a lot of careful thought, because the paper's thesis can't simply be a version of the claim "[X] is nostalgic." You will want to choose a source that elicits/represents/uses/critiques nostalgia in a way that's complex—and surprising—enough to merit sustained analysis. (Two questions to keep in mind as you consider possible sources: *Whose* nostalgia do I see at work here? And nostalgia for *what* or *when*?) If you're having trouble deciding on a primary source, feel free to choose one from the source bank below.

Along with using your primary source, you will also be finding and using secondary sources to help you establish your own argument. (For our purposes, "secondary sources" means scholarly work written by university professors, as well as writing by professional critics, such as a movie or book reviews written for national magazines and newspapers.) You will need to draw on **at least five secondary sources**. At least *three* of these sources should be peer-reviewed scholarly articles or books that you've located by yourself.

**Length:** Your final essay should be about 8-10 pages long (at least 2000 words). You should include a Works Cited section, and a Cover Letter.

**Citation Style:** MLA

### **Primary Source Bank:**

#### **Film and Television**

*Black Mirror*, "San Junipero" (TV series; Season 4, episode 3)

*Stranger Things*, "Chapter One: The Vanishing of Will Byers" (TV series; Season 1, Episode 1)

*The Wonder Years*, "Pilot" (TV series; Season 1, episode 1)

*Back to the Future* (1985 film)

*Pleasantville* (1998 film)

#### **Fiction**

*Brideshead Revisited*, Evelyn Waugh (1945 novel)

*My Antonia*, Willa Cather (1918 novel)

*The Grass Harp*, Truman Capote (1951 novella)

#### **Nonfiction**

*Hunger for Memory*, Richard Rodriguez (1982 memoir)

*Speak, Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov (1966 memoir)

### **Questions?**

Feel free to email me at [bpietras@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:bpietras@fas.harvard.edu).

Best,  
Dr. Pietras